

**Remarks**  
**for the**  
**Apollo 8 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

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Good evening. I am very, very sorry that I cannot be with you in person at this event. As someone who has spent his entire professional life in the space business, nothing would be more rewarding. But I had pre-existing commitments on the opposite coast that simply could not be rescheduled, and am therefore especially grateful to Bill Anders for offering these remarks to you in my stead.

I was a nineteen-year-old college sophomore when *Apollo 8* flew. I watched it on television – in black-and-white. So I can never share the experience in the same way as it is shared by those of you who lived it and are gathered here to remember that. But while I am a dyed-in-the-wool slide-rule-and-pocket protector engineer, I have tried also to understand the history of our enterprise, and the events and decisions that came before my time. I believe that an understanding of how and why our predecessors took the actions they did provides a rich context with which to inform our decisions today.

With that in mind, I have long thought that the decision to send *Apollo 8* to the moon was one of the most crucial in NASA's history, and might well stand first on the list. To decide to send people to the moon for the very first time would always be a historic moment. But in the circumstances under which it was made, it was an utterly amazing, astounding decision.

The first time the Saturn V was launched with men aboard, they were sent to the moon on *Apollo 8*. Only two unmanned test flights preceded the mission, and the second of those was about as close to an outright failure as a launch can be without actually scattering rocket parts into the ocean. The mission was only the second manned flight of the Apollo spacecraft, and planning for the circumlunar mission began before *Apollo 7* had even flown. The very idea of a lunar flight for *Apollo 8* was a backup plan. It had been planned to test the lunar module on this flight, but the spacecraft was not ready. Rather than essentially repeating *Apollo 7*, possibly in a higher orbit, the idea was put forth to take *Apollo 8* all the way to the moon.

It seems to me that the decision to go to the moon with *Apollo 8* had the effect of clearing the game board, as it were. Decisions of this magnitude have had that effect throughout history. If you're Julius Caesar, at some point you have to decide to cross the Rubicon, or not. If you're Dwight Eisenhower, and your orders are to "cross the Channel, enter the heartland of Germany,

and free the continent of Europe”, at some point you have to launch the fleet, or not. In the Apollo program, at some point a Flight Director was going to have to say, “Go for TLI”, or not. To take this step required everyone to realize, and to acknowledge, that most of what could be accomplished in Earth orbit had been, and that it was time to move on. It was time to test the hardware, the operational procedures, the navigation systems in the deep space environment for which they had been designed. If not now, when? And if not now, why? Many individual decisions had to be made, all across the program. Who would be the one to say, “my team is not ready”? Would anyone? The answer, of course, was that no one would. But without the decision to go, that answer would never be known. And so tonight I applaud those here and not here who made that decision, as well as the three of you who flew it, knowing what the outcome can be when you decide to step off into the unknown. To me, all of you are heroes.

In terms of lessons for today, maybe the most significant thing about the *Apollo 8* decision is what didn’t happen. The Congress didn’t ask for more study. The National Academy was not granted the right to second-guess the decision criteria. There was no call for an independent assessment of whether NASA was *really* ready to return to flight – to the moon, no less – after a failure on the prior Saturn V flight. White House staff didn’t inquire as to how President Johnson’s legacy would be affected if the mission failed. The Office of Management and Budget didn’t ask why the *Apollo 8* mission plan hadn’t been submitted for approval along with NASA’s FY69 budget request. And no one in the blogosphere was arguing that we should be going to the moon by a different method.

NASA’s leaders made the decisions as to when and how to fly, and our agency and contractor teams carried them out. I really don’t think that NASA’s current leaders, people who in my judgment are every bit as capable as those of the Apollo era, would be allowed by our various overseers to make an equivalent decision today. And until and unless we as a nation can again understand why it is necessary that great enterprises be executed in this fashion, I fear for our nation in this tough and competitive world.